

In and farming
frontiers respond to
the essay



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The Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s brought economic and social change to the cities as well as the frontier. During this transformation, entrepreneurs and laborers could not rise up as individuals against big businesses and were offered little chance for unions so they were compelled to assimilate themselves into America's largely capitalist industries.

Likewise, farmers, miners, and long drive cowboys were affected and influenced by larger, more profitable "corporations" including large-scale cash crop farms, ore-breaking machines, and the railroad. Thus, the mining, ranching, and farming frontiers responded to the industrial revolution in the same way as entrepreneurs and laborers, as each group was ultimately intercepted and changed by larger businesses and elite corporations.

Dusty-whiskered "Pike's Peakers" poured into the ore-filled Rockies to mine their fortunes. Dishpans in hand, these groups of rough young men soon gathered all of the loose pay dirt. Consequently, the age of big business was ushered into the mining industry. Large, heavy ore-breaking machinery was imported. As an individual miner was unable to undertake such an expensive operation, these smaller gold-washers were simultaneously replaced with bustling, impersonal corporations. The mining frontier, mirroring the adventurous Wild West, attracted more population and wealth, further pushing small miners by the wayside.

The iron fingers of the transcontinental railroad conveniently solved the problem of marketing the tough, long-horned cattle of the grassy plains of Texas. Now, the prosperous business of the "Long Drive" depended on herding the cattle to the nearest railroad terminal. Texas cowboys drove their herds over endless, fenceless, and unpopulated plains, and accordingly

reaped large profits. Soon, however, the ever-reaching railroads brought in homesteaders and sheepherders who built barbed-wire fences. These fences became too numerous for the cowboys to cut down. Overexpansion, due largely in part to the railroads, compelled the cowboys to give way to the lives of plowboys. The long drive became something of the past and stockmen began to fence in their ranches and breed their cattle selectively, so as to continue making a profit and to also avoid overproduction. The railroad, America's first big business, was the pinnacle protagonist of the ranching frontier, but resulted in another big business: cattle ranching.

Small farmers were lured to the Great American Desert by the Homestead Act, which in due course proved to be a cruel hoax, the railroads, and higher wheat prices, a result of crop failures abroad. But, before long, times changed as times always do. High wheat prices led farmers to focus on growing single cash crops such as wheat or corn. Profits were used to purchase other produce at the general store and manufactured goods in town or by mail order. The innovative, large-scale farmers who came to life had to buy expensive machinery to plant and harvest their fields quickly. Small farmers became an age of the past, as they hadn't enough money to invest in such costly efforts. Mechanization caused the growth of bonanza farms and affected once-small farmers in a way such that a lowly sodbuster either flourished (although only temporarily) or was coerced to return to the rank of an industrial worker. Once again, the rapidly industrializing 'big businesses' had intervened to either adulterate or enhance a homesteader's destiny.

Last but certainly not least, the lot of an entrepreneur or a laborer was affected to a great degree by the swings of the economy and the whims of an employer during the lively Industrial Revolution. As the American Pageant Twelfth Edition explains, during industrialization, corporations “ could dispense with the individual [or small party of] worker[s] much more easily than the worker[s] could dispense with the corporation”. For example, if workers went on strike, due to the building of the railroad and ever-growing immigrant population, the corporate owner could import workers who were willing enough to even work for the “ starvation” wages “ nativists” scoffed at. Also, further increasing the poor worker’s disposability, machines began rapidly replacing many employees. Still another advantage bestowed upon large corporations was the court’s rule. More often than not, federal judges ruled in favor of big business.

Laborers were often forced to sign “ yellow-dog” contracts, promising to never join a union, and could easily be “ black-listed” if they were caught doing otherwise. Many workers remained ever indebted to a “ company town” grocery store and thus lived in virtual serfdom. Throughout the Industrial Revolution, laborers and entrepreneurs were subjected to live under the hand of a big business employer who never failed to stifle one’s individual originality and creativity in the utterly detached factory.

Therefore, although the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century brought about great prosperity, it was mainly a game successfully played by the “ fittest” and all else were merely the pawns under each far-reaching hand. The dusty and bewhiskered miner became just another day laborer. The cow punching Texan of the long drive settled down to become a cattle

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breeder. Subsistence farmers, trying to make their living out of far-from-black land dirt, were forgotten as costly mechanization prevailed the plow, seeder, and harrow trio. Finally, the corporate owners exploited their wealth and power and ultimately led workers to band together to improve their precarious and lowly conditions. In this way, the laborer's and entrepreneur's response to the industrial revolution was very similar to that of the mining, farming, and ranching frontiers, as each recognizable unit was forever changed when it passed through the plutocratic and capitalist 'big businesses'.